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AUTHOR Levin, Henry M.
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ABSTRACT

This report advocates the implementation of accelerated schools as a new strategy for at-risk students by focusing on the success of the model Accelerated Schools Program (ASP) at Stanford University. Under this program, conventional schools with large at-risk populations can be transformed into accelerated schools. Designed to accelerate at-risk students' progress, the goals of ASP include closing the achievement gap so that students perform at grade level by the time they leave the sixth grade. Founded on the principles that parents, teachers, and students should have common goals (unity of purpose); that each accelerated school constituency should participate in the decision-making process (empowerment); and that each school constituency (especially parents) can and should contribute as a learning resource to the total educational endeavor (building on strengths), the successes of the ASP have been substantial. (JAM)

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Consortium on Educational Policy Studies
BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA

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POLICY BULLETIN

Consortium on Educational Policy Studies
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Accelerated Schools: A New Strategy for At-Risk Students

Henry M. Levin

A research team from Stanford University is piloting a new approach, the Accelerated Schools Program, to assist at-risk students. Under this program, conventional schools with large at-risk populations can be transformed into accelerated schools. The main features of these schools include:

- *Empowering teachers*
- *Requiring substantial parental involvement*
- *Utilizing the services of businesses, senior citizens, and other community resources*

Ultimately, accelerated schools become total institutions devoted to speeding up, rather than slowing down, the progress of at-risk students, so they can perform at or above grade level by the end of sixth grade.

The At-Risk Crisis

The public schools of Indiana and the nation are becoming increasingly characterized by students considered to be educationally at-risk or disadvantaged. At-risk students lack the home and community resources to fully benefit from conventional schooling practices. Such students are especially concentrated among minority groups, immigrants, non-English-speaking families, single-parent families, and poverty populations. Because of poverty, cultural differences, or linguistic differences, they tend to have low academic achievement and high secondary school dropout rates. These educational deficiencies translate into poor life chances with respect to employment and income as well as political and social participation in American society.

About the author: Henry M. Levin is a professor in the School of Education, Stanford University, and the director of the Center for Educational Research at Stanford (CERAS).

The challenge of meeting the educational and social needs of at-risk students has become especially prominent because of the rapid growth of these populations. High birth and immigration rates among these groups have increased substantially the numbers and proportions of disadvantaged students in U.S. schools. Recent estimates suggest that about 30% of America's students in primary and secondary schools are disadvantaged and that this proportion will continue to rise sharply in the future (Levin, 1986; Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1988). In many major cities—including Indianapolis and Gary—the majority of students are educationally at-risk.

More often than not, at-risk students begin school without the skills needed to succeed in the standard school curriculum. And the longer they stay in school, the farther behind they fall. By sixth grade their achievement is two years behind grade level on average, and by twelfth grade it is four years behind. Even these statistics understate the magnitude of the problem because about half of the at-risk student group fails to complete high school.

Unless we are able to intervene successfully, there are dire consequences in store for the American economy. Because a larger and larger portion of new workers will be unprepared for available jobs, the quality of the labor force will deteriorate considerably. As a result, employers—especially those in regions most affected by disadvantaged labor forces—will experience higher training costs, lagging productivity, and competitive disadvantages.

These economic losses will be accompanied by rising costs of public services for disadvantaged populations. More citizens will have to rely upon public assistance for survival, and increasing numbers of undereducated teens and adults will pursue illegal activities to obtain the income that is not available through legal pursuits (Berlin & Sum, 1988, pp. 28-30). In fact, economic analyses suggest that it is much less expensive to pay now for education than to pay later for crime and welfare (Levin, in press).

Are We on the Right Track?

At present, the most common way to assist the educationally disadvantaged is to provide them with remedial

EA 021 151

or compensatory services to improve their educational achievement. But this approach often does not work and may actually contribute to student failure (Levin, 1988) by:

- reducing expectations for at-risk students and their teachers and stigmatizing such students as slow learners;
- slowing down the pace of instruction so that at-risk students fall farther and farther behind their non-disadvantaged peers;
- emphasizing the mechanics of basic skills without providing substance and applications that will keep the at-risk student interested and motivated;
- providing no mechanisms or incentives for closing the achievement gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students; and
- advancing strategies for at-risk students without adequately involving teachers and parents in the formulation of these strategies.

Educators had hoped that the reform movement of the 1980s, which stressed higher standards for all students (particularly those in high school), would generate new strategies for helping at-risk students. But at-risk programs have tended to rely on remedial or compensatory services. It is not surprising, therefore, that the status of at-risk students has not improved under the latest reforms. Some researchers have even suggested that raising standards without providing additional resources or new strategies to assist disadvantaged students may actually increase the likelihood of their dropping out (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1985).

Thus it seems clear that we need new strategies to improve the educational chances of at-risk students, strategies that focus not on remediating students who have already fallen behind, but on accelerating the progress of students early in their elementary school careers.

Accelerated Schools for At-Risk Students

One alternative to present practice is the Accelerated Schools Program (ASP) at Stanford University. This program is designed to build on the knowledge base that supports a different set of assumptions for helping at-risk students achieve school success (Edmonds, 1979; Levin, 1987, 1988; Slavin, 1987). At its heart is the notion of doing for at-risk students what has been done for many gifted and talented students—striving to accelerate their progress rather than lowering expectations for their advancement.

The goal of ASP is to accelerate learning so that at-risk students are able to close the achievement gap and perform at grade level by the time they leave sixth grade. This approach is also expected to reduce dropouts, drug use, and teenage pregnancies by creating a strong sense of self-worth and educational accomplishment for students who now feel rejected by schools and frustrated about their own abilities.

Accelerated schools are characterized by high expectations on the part of teachers, parents, and students; target dates by which students are expected to meet particular educational requirements; stimulating instructional programs; planning by the educational staff who offer the programs; and the use of all available resources in the community, including parents, senior citizens, and social agencies.

Organizational Approach

The organizational approach of accelerated schools is based on three major principles:

- Unity of purpose
- Empowerment
- Building on strengths

Unity of purpose refers to agreement among parents, teachers, and students on a common set of goals for the school that will be the focal point of everyone's efforts. Clearly, these should focus on bringing children into the educational mainstream so that they can fully benefit from their later schooling experiences and adult opportunities.

Empowerment means expanding the ability of key participants to make important decisions at the school level and in the home to improve the education of students. It is based upon breaking the stalemate among administrators, teachers, parents, and students in which the participants tend to blame each other, as well as other factors "beyond their control," for the poor educational outcomes of disadvantaged students. Unless all of the major actors can be empowered to participate in and take responsibility for the educational process and educational results, it is unlikely that the desired improvements will take place or be sustained.

Central to the accelerated school strategy is the placement of curriculum and instructional decisions in the hands of the instructional staff of the school. Classroom teachers know the children best. They understand their learning needs, styles, and capabilities in ways most administrators and program specialists cannot. If desired changes in student achievement are to be realized, teachers must be given the authority and responsibility to design curriculum and instructional programs in ways that are compatible with their unique classroom perspectives.

To facilitate this process, each accelerated school has an overall steering committee and task forces composed

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of the principal, teachers, other staff, and parents. The principal serves a central function as instructional leader in coordinating and guiding the decisions of teachers and in addressing the logistical needs for translating these decisions into reality. School staff work together to set out a program that is consonant with student needs and the strengths of the district and the staff itself. Information, technical assistance, and training are provided by district personnel. In this way, the reform is a "bottom-up" approach: those who are providing the instruction make the decisions that they will implement and evaluate.

Building on strengths means utilizing all of the learning resources that teachers, administrators, students, parents, and communities can bring to the educational endeavor. In the quest to place blame for the lack of school efficacy in improving the education of the disadvantaged, it is easy to exaggerate weaknesses of the various participants and ignore strengths. But the strengths of these groups are considerable. Parents have a tremendous influence on the education of their children; they love their children deeply and long for them to succeed. Teachers are capable of insights, intuition, and organizational acumen that are lost when schools exclude them from participating in the decisions they must implement. School-based administrators are underutilized because they are placed in "command" roles to meet the directives and standard operating procedures of districts rather than to work creatively with parents, staff, and students.

Instead of perceiving disadvantaged students as lacking the learning behaviors associated with middle-class students, the ASP views them as having unique assets that can be used to accelerate their learning. These often include an interest in oral and artistic expression, a capacity for involvement in intrinsically interesting tasks, and an ability to learn to write before attaining competence in decoding skills which are prerequisite to reading. In addition, at-risk students can serve as enthusiastic and effective learning resources for other students through peer tutoring and cooperative learning approaches (Slavin, 1983).

Finally, communities have a number of resources including youth organizations, senior citizens, businesses, and religious groups that could become major assets for the children attending an accelerated school.

Main Features of Accelerated Schools

- Changes the entire structure of the school instead of simply grafting remedial classes onto a school with a conventional agenda
- Empowers teachers to plan the school's educational programs
- Requires substantial parental involvement (parents are expected to sign an agreement detailing their obligations to their children)
- Utilizes the services of businesses, college students, senior citizens, and other community resources
- Uses an extended-day program with emphasis on language and problem solving
- Stresses acceleration rather than remediation, intending to bring students to grade level by the end of sixth grade

Curriculum and Instructional Strategies

The instructional program is based upon an accelerated curriculum designed to bring all children to grade level or higher in core curricular areas (i.e., scoring at the 50th percentile or above on norm-referenced standardized achievement tests in reading comprehension, language, mathematics, etc.). The program involves a heavily language-based approach across the curriculum, even in mathematics, with an early introduction to writing and reading for meaning. Students learn to apply their new academic skills in interesting ways to everyday problems and events—a practice that demonstrates the usefulness of what is being taught and introduces a problem-solving orientation.

Accelerated schools also use an extended-day program that includes rest periods, physical activities, arts, and a time for independent assignments or homework. During this period, volunteers—college students and senior citizens—work one-on-one with students to provide individual learning assistance. Students also engage in peer tutoring and cooperative learning, both of which are especially effective with disadvantaged students (Slavin & Madden, 1989). Since many of the students are "latch-key" children, the extension of the school day is attractive to parents.

Parent Involvement

Parent involvement is a central focus of the Accelerated Schools Program. Research on parental and family involvement supports the important role that families can play in raising the educational accomplishments of their students (Epstein, 1987). The accelerated school builds on parental involvement in several ways.

First, parents or guardians are expected to affirm an agreement that clarifies the goals of the accelerated school and the obligations of parents, students, and school staff. The agreement is explained to parents and translated, if necessary. Parental obligations include:

- ensuring that their children go to bed at a reasonable hour and attend school regularly and punctually;

- setting high educational expectations for their children;
- talking to them regularly about the importance of school;
- taking an interest in their children's activities and the materials that the children bring home;
- encouraging their children to read on a daily basis;
- ensuring that independent assignments are addressed; and
- responding to queries from the school.

The importance of the parental role is emphasized through the dignity of an agreement that is accepted by all parties. Students and school staff also have appropriate obligations, with the understanding that the accelerated school will only succeed if all three parties work together.

Second, parents may participate in the governance structure of the school through membership on task forces and the steering committee.

Finally, parents are given frequent opportunities to interact with the school program and school staff through an "open door" policy and a parent lounge, as well as to receive training for providing active assistance to their children. Such training includes not only the skills for working with a child, but also many of the academic skills necessary to understand what the child is doing. In this respect, accelerated schools may find it necessary to work closely with agencies that offer adult basic education to provide parents with the necessary academic foundation. The parental dimension can improve the capacity and effort of the child, increase the time devoted to academic learning, and provide additional instructional resources in the home.

Evaluation

Student progress is evaluated by an assessment system that periodically monitors performance to assure that students are on the appropriate learning trajectory. The system emphasizes acquisition of higher order thinking and reasoning skills in core curricular areas and assesses proficiencies in other areas (e.g., arts, social skills) as well. These periodic assessments are used to provide feedback and to guide the use of interventions and new practices. In addition, the schools conduct evaluations of other areas of operation, including parental involvement, staff decision-making, and implementation of new programs.

A Total Learning Environment

The Accelerated Schools Program does not simply graft compensatory or remedial classes onto schools with a conventional agenda. Rather, it transforms the school into a total learning environment for accelerating the educational progress of the disadvantaged. The stress is on the school as a whole rather than on a particular grade, curriculum, approach to teacher training, or other more limited strategy.

Parents believe that this approach has a high probability of ultimate success because it emphasizes the instrumental goal of bringing students to grade level or above by the completion of sixth grade; it elicits a renewed commitment on the part of administrators, teachers, parents, and students; it stresses acceleration of learning, critical thinking, and high expectations; it relies on a professional model of school governance which is attractive to educators; it benefits from instructional strategies that have shown good results for the disadvantaged within existing models of compensatory education; and it draws upon all of the resources available to the community, including parents, college students, and senior citizens.

Present Status of Accelerated Schools

Since 1987, the Accelerated Schools Program at Stanford University has been collaborating with two elementary schools that have very high concentrations of disadvantaged students. These two schools are in San Francisco and Redwood City, California. Through these pilot programs, ASP staff have begun to translate and implement the principles of accelerated schooling while simultaneously learning how to collaborate most effectively with practitioners. It is important to remember that a conventional school cannot be transformed overnight; ASP staff estimate that this process takes about six years. This means that neither pilot school has implemented the full program at this time. Each school has set initial priorities and is working to implement these while undertaking additional priorities as the initial ones are addressed.

In the first year and a half of operation, the pilot schools have experienced notable gains in parental involvement, student behavior, and staff decision-making and responsibility. The evaluation model for the schools has been designed to look sequentially at: (a) changes in the decision process and staff interactions, as well as outcomes of the decision process; (b) implementation of decisions; and (c) results of implementation for students, parents, and staff. Evaluations of initial gains in achievement will be available in the Autumn of 1989.

Since the Fall of 1988, the Commissioner of Education for the State of Missouri has been sponsoring a statewide system of pilot accelerated schools in six districts including St. Louis and Kansas City. The Illinois State Board of Education has initiated a statewide network of 24 pilot accelerated schools to begin functioning in the Fall of 1989, and Salt Lake City has made commitments to three accelerated schools this year. In these cases, ASP staff have been providing training and technical assistance, although responsibility for the schools has been undertaken by the local educational agencies with state support in Missouri and Illinois.

The potential for accelerated schools to address the needs of at-risk students is a matter that should be considered by state and local educational policymakers. The transformation of existing schools to accelerated ones, however, is not a trivial change. Such a metamorphosis requires careful planning, analysis of requirements for support and technical assistance, and a willingness to shift many of the major educational decisions to staff and parents at school sites. And like any other changes, this transformation will have its costs. Costs can be divided into two types, the costs of implementing the accelerated school process and the costs of improvements in instruction. Implementation of the accelerated school process requires resources for release-time for teachers and consultant and materials expenses for training and facilitation. The transformation necessitates creative scheduling of meetings and the use of all staff development times and faculty meetings for accelerated school activities. In addition, approximately $5,000-10,000 a year is needed for substitutes to provide adequate time for teachers to participate in the accelerated school process. About another $5,000 a year is required for training personnel, materials, and other costs of retreats. Thus, for about $30 per student, a school with 500 students can initiate the accelerated school process. Of course, any changes that emerge from the process may have additional resource requirements, particularly those that would require additional staff.

Accelerated Schools in Action

Illinois Network of Accelerated Schools
c/o Dr. Lyndon Wharton
Illinois State Board of Education
100 North First St.
Springfield, IL 62777–0001
This network includes 24 schools that will initiate their programs in the 1989–90 school year. Copies of their newsletter can be obtained by writing:
INAS Newsletter
Illinois State Board of Education
PD & D (E-233)
100 North First St.
Springfield, IL 62777–0001

Missouri Accelerated Schools
c/o Ms. Joan Solomon
Missouri Department of Elementary
and Secondary Education
P.O. Box 480
Jefferson City, MO 65102
This group includes 6 pilot schools that began operation in the 1988–89 school year.

Salt Lake City Accelerated Schools
c/o Dr. Mary Jean Johnson
Assistant Superintendent of Instruction
Salt Lake City School District
440 East 100 South
Salt Lake City, UT 84111
This group includes 2 elementary and 1 middle school that began operation during the 1988–89 school year.

Stanford Accelerated Schools Program
c/o Henry M. Levin
CERAS 402
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305
These 2 schools include the Daniel Webster School in San Francisco and the Hoover School in Redwood City, California. They have been in operation since the 1987–88 school year and are the basis for experimentation and testing of the accelerated school model.

Conclusion

The Stanford Accelerated Schools Program is not the only approach to acceleration. Comer (1980) and Madden, Slavin, Karweit, and Livermon (1989) have achieved extraordinary results using principles that are similar to the ASP, and the Reading Recovery Program developed by Marie Clay has demonstrated the potential to accelerate initial reading performance of at-risk students (Boehnlein, 1987; Clay, 1979).

But one must be cautious of the "quick fixes" and the mechanical packaged approaches to curriculum and instruction that have characterized educational reform for the disadvantaged. These have not shown long-term results that are educationally meaningful. If we are to stem the emerging tide of educational, economic, political, and social problems attached to rising numbers of at-risk students, we must change the structure of schools rather than just focus on providing new "teacher-proof" curriculum or staff development packages. At Stanford, the ASP staff believes that a major theme underlying those changes is the motto: "Don't Remediate: ACCELERATE."

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Consortium on Educational Policy Studies
Education, Suite 326
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405
(812) 855-7445; 855-1240

Martha McCarthy, Director
Gayle Hall, Associate Director

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Dr. Phil Piele, Director
ERIC Clearinghouse on Educ. Mngmt.
University of Oregon
Eugene OR 97403